The Construction of Masculinities in Children's Picture Books

A Political Act?

Grant Webb
Faculty of Education
Mackay Campus
Central Queensland University

Introduction

Current events such as the development of the 'Promise Keepers' organisation around the world are doing much to foreground issues of masculinity (Stodghill, 1997). In recent years through a variety of movements there has been much focus on the construction and re-construction of a wider range of femininities. Now, there is a call from many men (and women) to 'do the same for boys'. That is, to make problematic the narrow view of what it means to be 'truly' masculine that still permeates many aspects of our culture. For some men, this is a backlash against feminism and the gains that have been made, while for others it is complementary to the feminist movement.

In recent years, much attention has been given to how a range of femininities is being constructed in children's picture books and the values and beliefs attached to these cultural constructions. It is now widely recognised that picture books are not inferior substitutes for texts that contain only written text, and are definitely not only for
young children who still need ‘help’ with reading words. They are
extremely complex inter-semiotic texts that have the ability to create
and replicate hegemonic ideologies, values and beliefs.

As a result of this (re)focus, picture books, such as Bossyboots (David
Cox), The Paper Bag Princess (Robert Munsch) and Princess Smartypants
(Babette Cole) have been composed which offer anti-stereotypical
constructions of femininity. An important part of ‘doing the same for
boys’ is to uncover the range of masculinities currently being
constructed in children’s picture books and to make problematic narrow
representations of men and masculinity.

Initially, the paper will highlight a number of issues associated with
men studying men and masculinities before exploring the current debate
regarding the construction of gender, the social construction of
masculinities, the difficulties in defining masculinity and the role
that picture books play in this construction of masculine identity. It
will then explore the construction of masculinities in a number of
award winning picture books and discuss any problematic aspects of the
representations with a specific focus on the tension between being
masculine and being literate, in a narrow school-based sense of
literacy.

The aim is to focus on the problematic practice of valorising
short-listed books without fully exploring the messages that they are
privileging about masculinity. A note of caution however. This
discussion is not to critique the Awards of the Children's Book Council of Australia and direct criticism towards the judges. It would be reasonable to assume if in the enormous number of texts that were offered for judging each year there were texts which offered 'alternative constructs of masculinity', they would be judged favourably. It appears that texts dealing with issues of alternative masculine constructions are not available. There could be many reasons for this lack of counter-sexist texts, an issue I don't have space to explore in this article.

Before proceeding it may be useful to clarify the use of the terms 'masculinities' and 'femininities'. The term 'masculinities' is used to avoid both the tendency to treat abstract concepts as if they have a concrete reality and the suggestion that there is some single, common essence to being male (despite the strategic importance of essentialism on occasions). As with masculinity, femininity is not a monolithic discourse but there are many feminisms.

Some Issues About Men Studying Men

While Hearn (1994) argues that any study of men and masculinities must be undertaken by men themselves, I would argue there are both problems and benefits in this stance. I accept that just as there is greater value about a woman speaking about femininities, there is more credibility speaking as a man about men and masculinities rather than a women speaking about or for men and masculinities (Singh, 1995).
However there are also dangers. Garbutcheon Singh (1994, p.5) argues that "in the course of normal events, a patriarchal society does not call upon men to make their gender problematic as it does for women". Further, he argues that "because men have been forced by circumstances and pressures to make masculinity problematic [that is, through feminist work, men's dominance and power in society has been challenged] any work done by men in this area must be suspect" (p.16). Another important issue is that men are not widely oppressed in our society and this means that there is a difficulty in making masculinities problematic (Garbutcheon Singh, 1994).

In other words, men need to be careful that through their self-critique there is not a tendency for the outcome to be the legitimising and entrenching existing power relationships between men and women, men and men, and perpetuate a narrow view of what it means to be a man. As a man studying men I am interested in challenging all forms of patriarchy and the power constructs that are seen as legitimate within this ideological framework.

Social Theories of Gender Construction

In recent years, many theories, but in particular, three dominant theories, have been developed to explain how gender is constructed. An initial theory of biological determinism has been widely problematised. A second explanation, sex role theory was accepted for a period of time
until researchers began to criticise it because its explanatory power was too limited (Connell, 1987 cited in Kenway, 1995).

This socialisation or sex role theory portrays children as passive recipients of a gender identity through the influence of stereotyped expectations that come from the family and peers, and that social conditioning is the main way that children 'learn' to become masculine or feminine. This explanation has now been broadened to acknowledge the active role that children undertake in developing their gender identity.

In other words we, as individuals and as groups, are not passively shaped by the larger societal forces such as schools or the media, but are active in selecting, adapting and rejecting the dimensions we choose to incorporate, or not, into our version of gender. (Allard, Cooper, Hildebrand and Welands, cited in Department of Education, Queensland, 1996, p.53)

While current theory, that is the active construction of gender, suggests that children are active in constructing their own gender identity from their interaction with various cultural and social contexts, it must however also acknowledge the fact that many children do not have access to a wide range of (con)texts, and hence there is not a wide range of constructions to choose from and so, are limited to a narrow interpretation of what it is to be masculine or feminine. If however there is a wide variety of constructs available, there is
also an issue about the social value of each construct. What is also problematic here is the intersection of gender and other social constructs such as family structure, sexuality, age, ethnicity and socio-economic status.

The Problem With Defining Masculinity

Coming to a common understanding about masculinity(ies) is not an easy task. According to Connell (1995, p.68), "definitions of masculinity have mostly taken for granted our cultural stand-point, but have followed different strategies to categorise the type of person who is masculine. Four main strategies have been followed". He suggests that:

1. Essentialist definitions nominate a feature associated with being a man and places the emphasis on the possession of this feature. The problem here is who chooses the feature?

2. Positivist social science theorists gives a simple definition, namely: what men actually are. Through ethnography, whatever patterns are observed relating to what men do in a particular group is then called masculinity. There are many problems here, however the main one being that to list what men must/will do "requires that people are already sorted into the categories 'men' and 'women'"(Connell, 1995, p.69).

3. Normative definitions: These offer a standard to which men must aim
if they want to be described as masculine. Masculinity in this sense is what men ought to be. The problem here is that very few men actually meet the standard.

4. Semiotic approaches define masculinity through a system of symbolic differences in which masculinity and femininity are contrasted. "Masculinity is, in effect, defined as non-femininity" (Connell, 1995, p.70). This approach has been very effective in some areas such as cultural analysis, while in other areas it is very limiting.

It is recognised then that there are a variety of ways of attempting to define what it means to be masculine, each with inherent problems. What is obvious however, is that there is more than one kind of masculinity and to understand the various constructs, the focus needs to be on:

(a) the gendered relationships between men and women, girls and boys; and

(b) the gendered relationships between men and men, boys and boys.

According to Kenway (1995) it is this second aspect of studying and identifying the various constructs of masculinities where Connell departs from feminist work.

According to Alloway, Davies, Gilbert, Gilbert, and King (1996) when trying to deconstruct the concept of masculinity (especially when focussing on the textual practices of the video game industry), it may be useful to focus on some of the following issues:
Masculinity as violence

Masculinity and (physical) violence and its translation into sport

Relationships with women

Dominant forms of masculinity

Power and control

Embodyment of hegemonic masculinity through games

The body as peripheral

Connell (1987) suggests that various settings, for example, schools, homes, workplaces, offer a range of ways of being male and some of these ways are privileged and become valorised as superior while other ways of being a male become inferior. Those constructs which are seen most regularly, for example in written texts such as magazines and on television, tend to become those that are seen as superior or hegemonic, a kind of bench-mark for being a 'true man'. That is, according to Connell (1995, p. 77):

Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.

More specifically, Kenway and Fitzclarence (1997, p.121) define hegemonic masculinity as mobilising around physical strength, adventurousness, emotional neutrality, certainty, control, assertiveness, self-reliance, individuality, competitiveness, instrumental skills, public knowledge, discipline, reason, objectivity
and rationality.

While I accept this statement and accept that the term 'mobilising' implies that this is not a checklist, I would caution any simplistic notion of defining masculinity as a series of attributes. Masculinities and gender are negotiated in a range of situations, and so, as Morgan (1992) argues, we need to think of doing masculinities rather than being masculine.

Connell, (1995) also describes other masculinities as subordinate, complicitous or marginal. According to Kenway (1997, p. 59) "subordinate masculinity stands in direct opposition to hegemonic masculinity and is both repressed and oppressed by it". She describes some men as being complicitous with hegemonic forms of masculinity. Even though they may not meet the normative standards, they benefit in many implicit ways from the power that is associated with hegemonic forms of masculinity. "Marginalised masculinities which are associated with subordinate social groupings may draw both inspiration and legitimacy from hegemonic forms, but only wild structural power to the extent that they are authorised by the dominant class/race" (Kenway, 1997, p.59).

Sport is an area where hierarchies within gender and between genders can be clearly articulated. For example, Mills (1997, p.10) makes note that football has a place of prominence in the contemporary politics of masculinity. Like many codes [rugby league] it embodies all that is valorised about being male. The importance of this game as a marker of [real] masculinity is most evident in young men.
Fitz Clarence, Hickey and Mathews (1997, p. 69) argue that "young males are immersed in a culture of football. Media, family and peer group all play their part in constructing strong associations between developing manhood and participation in football". Mills (1997, p.10) also argues that while a game like football is linked explicitly to a hegemonic notion of masculinity (for example, through the valorising of pain, the notion of the body as an instrument and the privileging of physical performance), it is also linked because of its negative hierarchical effects on men 'who perform' marginalised or subordinate constructs of masculinity. While there are these negative links, the positive links to complicitous masculinity also need to be explored. All men benefit from this 'hypermasculine' activity because of the notion of constructing 'men as a unitary group' (p.12) regardless of the forms of masculinity they are performing and their difference in respect to sexuality, socio-economic status and ethnicity etc.

As discussed, the construction of gender is also interwoven with other social factors and is related to the notion of marginalised masculinities. Mills (1997, pp. 10 - 12) uncovers how a major part of the connectedness between football and dominant forms of masculinity are also a result of social factors of ethnicity and socio-economic status. He discusses that while football provides the greatest allure for working class and aboriginal boys, few of these players will make it into the big league. He states "It has been argues that for marginalised men who experience masculinity as 'other' there is a
desire to prove one's manhood in the public sphere... Football provides an arena where this may happen" (p.11). Of course, a study of the differing codes of football highlight the notion of masculinity also being about relationships between men. Soccer, the desire of many boys and men from within marginalised groups is positioned hierarchically below the contact codes and as a result in Australia has suffered from a 'feminist tag' (Mills, 1997).

While accepting Connell's notion of forms of masculinity, there are increasing descriptions of typology, many identified by Connell himself. For instance, Segal (1990) explores a range of competing masculinities from 'tough guys' and 'martial men', homosexuals through to black masculinity, and considers aspects of male domination and violence. Similarly, Connell (1989) also describes a range of masculinities ranging from 'cool guys', 'swots' and 'wimps'. These terms that have been developed to describe differing notions of masculinity could be clustered into hegemonic, complicitous, subordinate and marginalised views of masculinity however this would take away from the notion that these typologies are extremely connected to the interplay of gender with other social factors such as class and ethnicity and how boys within specific contexts start to develop their own notions and discourses for expressing a diversity of masculinities in a hierarchical sense.
The Role of Children's Literature

According to Janks (1991, p.iii) "language [and literature] is one of the means used to establish, maintain or challenge existing forms of power". How gender is presented and the associated activities, beliefs and emotions attached to particular genders are developed in children's picture books, have been a concern for many years. More specifically, through the work of feminism, much attention has been given to how females are being constructed in these texts. (see for example: Peterson and Lach, 1990; Tyquin, 1992; Fox, 1993; Temple, 1993)

According to Summers (cited in Wearing, 1996, p.104) male dominated cultural hegemony through the media has enabled women to be presented in children's books ... as good mothers, home-makers and moral gatekeepers or alternatively as sex objects, sirens and whores. Men on the other hand are portrayed as active, virile, heroes who make decisions and get important jobs done.

Summer's (1996) unidimensional portrayal of masculinity and femininity is to a certain extent problematic to anyone who argues that masculinity and femininity are pluralistic concepts. None the less, this stereotypical portray of women and men in picture books is a concern for both sexes.

As mentioned earlier, as a result of this focus, picture books, such as Bossyboots (David Cox), The Paper Bag Princess (Robert Munsch) and
Princess Smartypants (Babette Cole) have been composed which offer anti-stereotypical constructions of femininity. Gilbert (1988) however warns against the simplistic notion that by producing children's texts that are counter-sexist or non-sexist that we can change the ways in which children view themselves. She says the argument that girls will become assertive and aggressive if stories are about assertive and aggressive girls, that girls will become engineers and cranedrivers if stories portray women in such occupations...is unconvincing. It is also dangerous. (p.14) She also argues (p.14) argues that even though children's literature plays a major part, it is only one of the social forces at work.

While I accept the argument that books are only one social influence, I believe they are still worthy of analysis to uncover what they 'teach' boys about being masculine. Generally, picture books are still used by parents with their children at bedtime or other 'quiet times' and most often constitute a time of discussion and reflection. I would argue that unless aspects of these texts are explicitly discussed within a critical framework, then the dominant discourses in the text (which are taking the place of other discourses which are silenced) become naturalised. As Kenway (1997) argues, boys may learn (from picture books) that there are many different ways of being masculine, "some [are] more valued and prestigious and powerful than others, and that one way of being and feeling powerful as a male is to demonstrate power over other males and over females" (p. 59).

Trying to define the 'politics' surrounding the construction of a
variety of masculinities in children's picture books is not easy. Lemke (1995, p.1) argues that the interdependent relationship between textual meanings and the social context in which these meanings are generated and understood is so important that to understand either of these concepts, it is imperative to understand both. While a textual analysis can uncover meanings within texts (quite often these meanings are 'hidden'), these meanings can only be 'read' if there is an understanding of the 'politics' surrounding the meaning. Lemke (1995, p.1) states "texts record the meanings we make...politics chronicle our uses of power in shaping social relationships. The textual, in the broad sense of all the meanings we make, whether by word or by deeds, is deeply political'.

Central to this notion of text and politics is ideology, that is "[the] very common meanings we have learned to make, and taken for granted as common sense but which support the power of one social group to dominate another" (Lemke, 1995, p.2). However, Lemke (p. 3) challenges the notion of 'our common sense'. He asks critical (political) questions such as:

¥ Whose life produced this common sense (about what it means to be masculine)?

¥ In whose interests are the common sense assumptions made (about the power of masculinity which is portrayed in picture books)?

¥ Whose common sense (about masculinity) is silenced (in picture books)?

¥ In which cultures do these common sense understandings (about hegemonic masculinity) make sense?
How then can the construction of masculinities in children's picture books be considered political? By analysing texts and making (critical) meanings from a post-structuralist perspective of the ideologies that they both privilege as 'common sense' and silence, it is possible to take a political stance with respect to the motives (either implicit or explicit) of the authors and publishers.

This political discourse is essential if there is to be any hope of problematising the 'ideological functioning of discourses' (Luke, 1995, p.vii) which establish truth claims and a more fair and equitable society where multiple constructions of gender have equal space within all textual forms. Luke (1995, p.viii) argues that 'textual politics' is about a post-modern society where differences such as differences between and within genders can become part of the dominant textual discourse and analysed for their relations to ideology and power.

A Focus on the 1997 Short Listed Picture Books

I now want to take the notions of gender construction, the work that needs to be in developing multiple notions of masculinity and the political role that some children's picture books play in the enculturation of young boys into a narrow view of what it means to be masculine, to discuss the short listed picture books from 1997. My research therefore is based on the problematic aspects of the narrow view of masculinity in many award winning picture books and in
particular the (re)construction of hegemonic masculinity. This critical
stances arises from a pro-feminist position (Connell, 1994).

Children's Book Council of Australia

The following is a summary taken from promotional materials from the
Council. The Children's Book Council of Australia was established in
1945 in New South Wales and by 1959 it had become a national organisation.
Its main objective is the encouragement of children's reading. One of the main
activities of this Council is the Children's Book of the Year Awards.
The presentation of these awards has a number of objectives: to focus
attention amongst the community at large on children's books; to
emphasise literary and artistic qualities; to take into account the
child as reader; to encourage new talent; and above all recognise
outstanding achievements in books that are likely to be of lasting
merit and therefore to have made a contribution to Australian
children's literature. Literary merit is the primary consideration in
the judging, although child appeal is also taken into account as are
design, production and quality of printing, and the quality of
illustrations. In addition, for the Picture Book of the Year Award, the
judges consider the artistic and literary unity, or the artistic unity
in wordless books where the theme or concept is expressed solely
through illustrations.

The 1997 Short Listed Picture Books

According to the Children's Book Council of Australia, seventy-three
picture books were entered for the category of Picture Book for 1997.
Of these, six were shortlisted. One was deemed the winner while two were given Honour Awards.

In a report, composed jointly by the eight judges of the awards (Picture Book, Young Readers and Older Readers categories), it is clear that the judges are addressing the issue of picture books being 'political'. The report (cited in Reading Time, p.4) states

While no one can deny the power of literature in bringing about changes of attitudes, the Judges would urge authors and publishers to consider both the literary form and literary merits of their offerings. A social message, however worthy, merely grafted on to the bare outline of a plot will not of itself produce a worthwhile book. On the other hand, many of the best entries for this or any other year will also carry a worthwhile social message, but it will be couched in an engaging story enlivened by credible characters and well-realised settings. In 1997, almost all of the shortlisted titles in each of the fiction categories fit this description.

The report (p.7) also carries a message that many of the texts reflect themes which are related to contemporary social issues, this year in particular, many of the texts are related to the themes of grief and loss, death, dying and having to cope with change. While it must be acknowledged that no one picture book can support a full range of social issues, it is interesting to note if any of the texts support the discourse that celebrates a wide range of masculinities or if they privilege discourses of masculinity that replicate hegemonic forms.
Where are the texts that are counter-sexist in terms of masculinity?

What about the boys?

A central issue to this argument is the way in which these texts are valorised by librarians as 'good texts' because they are shortlisted. While the literary element may be deemed to be 'good', I would want to challenge the unquestioned valorising of these texts by educators in a wide variety of settings.

Text Analysis

In order to develop an understanding of the masculine constructions in the six texts, I first located and analysed any reviews of the texts to identify any mentions of gender issues, in particular problematic aspects of the (masculine) constructions. I took into account a number of views of hegemonic masculinity (as I have previously discussed) and used these notions to interrogate the texts. Williams (1996, p.19) suggests that 'a systematic analysis of the language features of a text is often useful to:

¥ help provide evidence that confirms or modifies an initial response;
¥ reveal ideologies that might otherwise have remained obscure; and
¥ make explicit to readers how a text is operating'.

Finally, over a period of time I shared these texts with a group of six non-Indigenous pre-schools boys who had not previously seen the texts. I had worked extensively within the preschool over the year and the boys were familiar with my presence in their environment. While
this does not negate the possibility of the 'tell him what he wants to
hear' syndrome, it made the boys more relaxed to share their thoughts
and understandings. The boys' comments regarding each of the texts
were in response to guiding questions. This scaffolding was used in an
attempt to enable the students to make explicit their notions of what
it is to be masculine (which of course varies because of social factors
such as class and ethnicity) and the extent to which these texts either
reaffirmed or challenged their notions.

I was then able to make comparisons between the textual analysis and
the boys' reactions to the male characters in the texts. While I
acknowledge that this is a superficial study, I would argue that it
gives some insight into an area that obviously needs further and more
detailed attention.

Although it was not the aim to focus on the portrayals of the female
characters in the text, these characters must be included especially
when we start looking at masculinities from a semiotic approach, that
is, defining masculinity through a system of symbolic differences in
which masculinity and femininity are contrasted. As Connell (1995, p.
70) suggests "masculinity is, in effect, defined as non-femininity".

Picture Book of the Year - Winner
HONEY, Elizabeth Not a Nibble Allen & Unwin

This text centres around a family's fishing trip. While Mum relaxes in
the tent reading a book, Dad, the 'boys' and Suzie go fishing every day. Dad and the boys are successful in catching fish and on some days different boys choose not to go fishing, however everyday Suzie is there trying to catch her fish. Eventually on the last day of the trip there is only a very determined Suzie and Dad left fishing. When Dad decides it is finally time to go home Suzie notices a whale and her calf. Even though she is not successful in catching a fish, she proudly proclaims to everyone that what happened to her was far better than catching fish.

According to an article in Reading Time (Vol. 41, No. 3) "this child centred story [is] full of warmth and good humour, texts and illustrations work in perfect harmony...the language used is appropriately simple, at times quite poetic, and a happy balance is maintained between prose and dialogue" (p.8).

Picture Book of the Year - Honour Books

JAMES, Ann (illus.) Margaret Wild (text) The Midnight Gang Omnibus

This text tells the story of a mischievous gang of babies, led by Baby Brenda, who after dark lead a 'double life'. While their parents think they are safely in bed, they are in fact having a fun time in the park, returning to their cots before dawn and subsequently sleeping all day because of their tiredness.

According to an article in Reading Time (Vol. 41, No. 3) "[the]...illustrations...enrich the onomatopoeic text in many
delightful and unexpected ways. This is truly a magical picture book, celebrating freedom and power of the imagination" (p.8).

I choose not to work with this text for two reasons. Firstly, Baby Brenda and her mother are the only characters who are identifiably gendered. This made a textual analysis difficult. Secondly, when I worked with the students on this text, they had very limited explanations regarding the portrayal of the characters. It could be argued that as a society we see babies as non-gendered and that a belief in the active construction of gender means that they have not yet had to make choices about the way in which they will construct their own gendered identity.

VIVAS, Julie (illus.) Ana Zamorana (text) Let's Eat! Omnibus

This text is told from a young boy's perspective and centres around an extended Spanish family where the heavily pregnant Mother has a constant battle to get all seven members of the family to eat a meal together. Eventually the mother is absent as she is in hospital giving birth. Finally, one week later everyone is together which makes for a special occasion.

According to an article in Reading Time (Vol. 41, No. 3) "the surface simplicity of the narrative and spare plotline is deceiving, for there are many subtexts. [the] lively, repetitive and cumulative text is beautifully integrated with joyous, expressive illustrations" (p. 3).
Picture Book of the Year - Shortlist

BANCROFT, Bronwyn (illus.) text collected by Roland Robinson, related by Percy Mumbulla The Whalers Angus and Robertson

This text tells the story of an Aboriginal whaler on the east coast of Australia, his culture and its relationship to the ocean. The story teller is not identified yet we know it is the nephew of the main character. According to the judge's report (Reading Time, Vol. 41, No. 3) "it is narrated sparsely and powerfully in vernacular, unsanitised first person. The voice is rich, evocative and vividly atmospheric" (p.3).

I choose not to work with this text because the text was outside my cultural experience and the analysis of the gender constructs must be related specifically to ethnicity. While to a certain extent that is also true for Let's Eat!, the text is portrayed to the reader as Eurocentric and therefore less problematic for analysis.

HARRIS, Wayne (illus.) Allan Baillie (text) DragonQuest Scholastic

This text invites the reader to accompany the two main characters on a quest to slay the last known dragon. After much searching and risking of lives from the Dragon Hunter and his young apprentice, the young boy finds the hidden dragon. The boy however has a change of heart and decides not to disclose to the Dragon Hunter the location of the dragon
to allow it to continue living.

According to Reading Time (Vol. 41, No. 3) "elements of traditional folklore and classical quest tales are combined imaginatively with rollicking, rhythmic and, at times majestic language to produce a handsome and dramatic picture book with a twist in its tail" (p.9).

MACKINTOSH, David (illus.) Gillian Rubinstein (text) Sharon, keep your hair on Random House

In this text a young couple find that as their family grows their house is too small. Jason, the husband and father is forever adding to their house to accommodate everyone. As they all leave home, the house is too large and Jason must start to dismantle it. Finally the family all want to move in again but Jason and Sharon are happy being alone in their small house and refuse to have any more visitors.

According to Reading Time (Vol. 41, No. 3) "the jaunty contemporary rap rhythm and skilful play with words, rhymes and meanings create a flowing text that hustles the action along. Both text and illustrations are spiced with delightful subtleties and many layers of humour and meaning..."(p.9).

Discussion of Findings

An initial analysis of the texts showed there was only one male
character who offered any anti-stereotypical construct of masculinity, and in this particular case (DragonQuest) this was only through a 'twist in the tale' and not a major theme of the text. For the majority of the text he was constructed in a traditional or hegemonic masculine sense. While this young boy in showed an alternative to the dominant version of masculinity in the resolution, maybe even enacting a subordinate view of masculinity where his actions were in direct opposition to hegemonic masculinity, I would argue that he was more complicitous than subordinate because of the way that he drew from and benefited from hegemonic forms. This subtle difference between "doing" complicitous and hegemonic masculinity was not detected by the students.

While not all male characters were overtly hegemonic in their construct (that is, for example, they did not continuously engage in violent behaviours or the exerting of power over women and other men), generally they could be classified by their actions as complicitous if not hegemonic. The ways in which females were constructed also demonstrated a binary regarding the silences of any actions associated with the male characters that are traditionally attributed to females.

In Not a Nibble, it is Dad who drives the car, sets up the tent, takes the kids fishing while Mum stays in the tent and reads. Suzie is the only female portrayed (especially through the illustrations) who at any time who is involved actively in fishing. Dad however obviously has a
very good relationship with his children and takes on quite a large parenting role, but only seems to develop this sense of parenting when adventure is involved. While Suzie enjoys fishing, it is the boys (Alex and Vin) and Dad who are obviously the better ‘fishermen’ because all three catch fish on the first day. Throughout the text there is a strong sense of competitiveness between the children. While this attribute may be attached to the female character, in a sense it validates Kenway’s (1995) notion that part of defining masculinity is the power relationships between males and females and males and males.

When returning from the day’s expedition, “Dad cleaned the fish and Mum cooked them in the big back frying pan”. While this ‘domestic’ portrayal is problematic for women, it is also problematic in terms of what is says about men’s incompetencies in domestic activities. This is an example of where a focus on the construction of males must be viewed alongside the construction of females from a semiotic perspective where masculinity is defined as anything that is not traditionally associated with being feminine.

The boys who responded to this text were explicit in their notions of dominant masculinity, the forms of masculinity and the power that exists between masculinity and femininity. To the majority of students, there was no doubt why the boys caught fish and Suzie didn’t. Boys are too good, Boys are better.

Girls can go fishing but they are not good at it. Boys are good at fishing

One boy suggested an alternative view:
Girls can still go fishing too 'cause I know a girl who went fishing
and she was the only one who caught a fish

The conversation also included the more general topic of the activities
that boys and girls 'should' do. The majority of responses involved
sport, supporting Alloway's et.al (1996) notion of the inextricable
link between masculinity and sport. For example:
Boys like playing sports like table tennis
Boys like going in the rain and getting dirty

When questioned what the book was telling them about fishing, there was
a unanimous response that:
Girls should not go fishing
Boys are better at fishing than girls

In Let's Eat!, it is the activities associated with the genders that
are the most obvious problematic aspects of this text. While females
are portrayed as cooks, gardeners and dancers, the male characters
hold traditional 'masculine occupations' such as carpenters. While my
views may appear to be in line with those of Summer's (1996), I am
interested in taking the binary further than between males and females
and focus on the occupations and power attached to occupations within
genders. However, I agree that any stereotypical portrayal of gender is
problematic to both sexes. Taking into account the notions of hegemonic
masculinity as defined by Kenway and Fitzclarence (1997), the male
characters in this text portray many of these elements:
physical strength: It is the males "who are working hard in the carpentry shop".

emotional neutrality: Emotions suggested within the text are attributed to the female characters. Any emotions attached to the male characters are silenced or left for the reader to 'fill in the gaps'.

adventurous and competitiveness: What could be more adventurous than a group of boys playing "hide-and-seek in the ruins of the castle"? "They are crawling between the fallen old stone blocks". Here the boys are also involved in a competitive activity.

holders of knowledge: Grandpa is the character who sits in the cafeteria who other men stand around and listen to his stories, waiting for him to 'impart his wisdom'.

Once again, the boys' reactions to this text was generally favourable. They seemed to focus heavily on the young boy playing hide-and-seek in the ruins as well as the father who was portrayed as a carpenter and overall, they felt very comfortable with the activities and the perceived 'work value' associated with each of the sexes. For example: The father works harder than the mother because making a table is harder than doing girl things like cooking

The mother can't be the carpenter because she doesn't know about all the tools

When the boys were asked to predict what activities the brother and the sister would be involved in that would keep them away from dinner, the responses were typical. With respect to literacy, when I asked which of
the two might be too busy reading to come and join the rest of the
family for a meal, there was no doubt that this would be the sister.
The sister might be playing with her dolls
The sister will be reading in her room. Girls like peace and quite
The boy might be helping his father build some things

To end this session, the students were asked to describe what aspects
of being a boy was reconfirmed for them in this piece of text, an
aspect that I would argue is at the centre of this debate about the
role of award-winning picture books in entrenching stereotypical

constructs of gender. The boys all described the same aspects of the
text: the manual labour of the father, the domestic nature of the
mother's character and the absence of any domestic activity attached to
the male characters, the adventurous and independent nature of the
brother in opposition to the artistic nature of the sister.

In DragonQuest, there is a total absence of human female characters,
except for a horse who is referred to as a "cowardly nag" and "three
dark witches [who] coil evil spells through the forest". The male
characters (the Dragon Hunter and the young boy) are both presented as
adventurous, heroic, strong, assertive, disciplined and self-reliant,
characteristics that Kenway and Fitzclarence (1977) argue define what
is means to be masculine in a hegemonic sense. This is however the one
text where an alternative view of masculinity is constructed. At the
end of the story the young boy decides not to tell the Dragon Hunter where to find the dragon. In one sense this does offer an alternative view, that is he does not feel the need to kill the dragon to make himself feel more like a man - a subordinate form of masculinity. It shows that he has emotions, that to be a worthwhile male you don't have to be competitive, objective and rational. However, in another sense the character is complicitous in his construct, drawing from and benefiting from, while not explicitly challenging dominant characteristics. The boys in the group did not see this character as worthwhile and described him as a 'wuss'. Their reading of the text was that the boy was not adventurous, was not strong, was not competitiveness and was scared of the dragon and didn't want to get into a fight. One student offered the comment that:
Maybe the boy is only pretending to be good but he is really mean
Another commented:
The boy is scared of the dragon

Before reading this text to the students I showed them the cover and asked them predict some people that they would find in the text. One student was very sure that...there will be no girls in the book because it is about dragons and only boys fight with dragons
Girls just cry all the time when there is danger
Another student offered the comment that:
Girls are afraid of dragons but boys aren't scared of dragons. Girls are 'scaredy-cats'
When asked if there would be any boys who would be scared of dragons, the response was that tough boys are not scared but some boys who were 'scaredy-cats' like girls may have been scared. Once again, the same student who had offered critical responses to other questions commented that:

There are some boys who don't like dragons - not just girls

This text was by far the most popular choice by all the boys. While not being able to elaborate on the reasons for the choice, the boys comments included:

I like this book because it had a dragon in it
I like the fighting
I want to fight a dragon

In Sharon, keep your hair on, the characters' activities once again follow a stereotypical pattern. Jason appears all too happy to be a bachelor living in his pad without the worry of a wife and children (no need for real men to have any type of emotional relationships)! This emotional neutrality and peace and quite fade when Jason marries and forever after is constantly 'nagged' by his wife Sharon. As discussed previously, part of trying to define masculinity is men's' relationships with women. The title of this text is a good indication of the gendered power relationships in the text. Sharon is portrayed as the typical nagging wife while Jason must 'put her in her place' and tell her constantly "Sharon, keep her hair on". Jason of course is the
builder of the family, Jim, his brother-in-law is the criminal whose wife and kids leave him because of his habits, Scott, the nephew loves sport and has aspirations to be an astronaut, and Brad another nephew is the child with the behavioural problems. While it was acceptable to the boys that the female characters (especially the aunty) could show emotions, to these boys, it was already firmly entrenched that Boys don't cry...especially tough boys

When working the students, many of them made connections to Let's Eat! which I had previously shared with them. With the father from each text both being portrayed as builders, some boys commented on the connection and were able to articulate the generalisations and stereotypes of hegemonic males that they were making.

All men are strong and can build things
I am going to be a carpenter when I grow up

Masculinity and Literacy

In taking into account the various explanations and attributes of hegemonic masculinity and the boys' reactions to these texts, it can be argued that a 'passive' school-based literacy is not a high priority for being masculine in a way that is socially privileged. Being highly literate, in a very narrow school-based sense, may be associated more with the 'Cyrils' or studious types (Kessler, Dowsett, Ashenden and Connell, 1985) rather than being an attribute of 'real' boys or men.

While in DragonQuest the young boy is initially reading a book, the book immediately takes on an interactive nature (like most of the texts
that seem to be appealing to contemporary boys) where the 'body become peripheral' (Alloway et. al., 1996). The text is a starting point for becoming involved in heroic activities. Of course, maybe through coincidence, it is this male character who not only reads but also 'whimps out' in killing a dragon.

This tension between 'traditional literacy' and 'dominant masculinity' was supported by the comments made by the boys over all the session as well as their actions at the end of each session.

Boys don't read very much
Girls read lots more than boys
Boys like fishing better than reading

When each session finished, I gave the boys a choice of going to the reading corner and reading with me or alone, or going to the block corner, none of the boys choose reading. While I accept that the reason for this decision may have been them wanting a change of activity, when questioned about their choice, the response was typical of the discourses that they had been mobilising through all the sessions.

Girls like reading, boys like karate
I don't like reading
Boys aren't good at reading
I don't like peace and quite

Conclusion
I would argue that it is paradoxical that while the Children's Book Council's main objective is the 'encouragement of children's reading' the high quality books that are available for them to valorise for young readers, who are in their initial explorations of 'school-based literacy', portray a view of masculinity where literacy practices are silenced as a 'soft option' at the expense of other 'harder masculine' pursuits such as fighting, fishing, building houses and killing dragons. It could be argued then that the main objective of the Council is in direct opposition to the practices that they are engaging in, of celebrating texts where there is a tension being 'literate' and being 'masculine'. This paradoxical situation however is broader than the Awards. Teachers and librarians must become more critical in their choice of texts and discard texts that constantly portray masculinity as a uni-dimensional notion. They must demand from publishers and authors texts which can be celebrated for the alternative ways in which they construct masculinity and privilege all of these constructs, something that is slowly happening in respect to the ways that females have been characterised in picture books.

It is imperative that all stakeholders in education continue to focus on:

- problematising the ways in which masculinities are currently being constructed in children's picture books;

- the appropriateness of current thoughts on gender construction (which are primarily a result of the work done with women) are for the
construction of masculinities;

¥ re-inventing taken for granted views on masculinities that were once
seen as unchangeable;

¥ exploring how a narrow and patriarchal view of masculinity is
affecting boys educational achievements, especially in the area of
literacy; and

¥ continue debate about how we as teachers (at all levels of education)
can employ strategies to 'do the same for boys'.

We must all be asking: 'what about the boys'?
References


Children’s Book Council of Australia, Reading Time, Vol.41, No. 3, August 1997


Communication.

Department of Education, Queensland (1996). Piecing it Together ...


Australian Curriculum Studies Association: Australia.


Addison Wesley: Melbourne.

